

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

**INFORMANT: HALLEH MAHINI [IRAN]
INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL
DATE: MARCH 14, 2008**

**C = CHRISTOPH
H = HALLEH**

Tape 08.17

C: If you could just state for the record your name? Where you live in Lowell? When you arrived?

H: My name is Halleh Mahini and I came to the U.S. at the end of 2000, and I actually married when I came here, and...you want me to tell you the situation of how I came here?

C: If you're comfortable with it, yes.

H: I got divorced in Iran a year before I came to the U.S. and I had a son from my first marriage. My husband, my new husband came to Iran for a visit, we met and he fell in love with me and asked me if I would move to the U.S and marry him. With my experience from my first marriage, I wasn't sure if that was the right decision, especially someone who has been living in different culture for so long. But then when he told me that I have a choice, to get a fiancé visa, move to the US, and if we feel happy together then we could marry, I felt more comfortable. But the other problem was my son. I don't know how much you know about the rules in Iran. To make the story short, men have all the rights, even taking the children after divorce. The father is the one who has the right of custody. Since my first husband didn't know anything about my new husband, or us leaving Iran, I had to escape with my son. If he knew that I was going to leave Iran, he would have taken my son away from me. So, after I came here, I called him and told him I was here and exchanged the phone and address in case he wanted to talk to his son. I didn't feel good doing that but that was the only way to keep my son.

C: How old was your son then?

H: He was seven.

C: So, now he's a teenager!

H: Now he's a teenager, yes.

C: So did you just fly directly from Tehran to Europe?

H: We went to Turkey to get the green card, actually the visa, and then to the U.S. and it took me a few years to get my green card. Now I'm a citizen.

C: Congratulations!

H: Yes, even though I am proud of being Iranian, I am grateful to be a citizen, because as soon as I want to travel and they see my Iranian passport, they are so rough, they are...

C: And that's the U.S. authorities?

H: Everywhere...Europe, U.S., everywhere. They search you all over, because as soon as they see you are Iranian, they think you are a terrorist.

C: Especially after 9/11, but you don't really have the comparison before and after...

H: Yes, that is true.

C: So your second husband, did he live in Lowell? Is that how you ended up here?

H: Yes, he has been living here for almost thirty years now.

C: Oh wow, okay. So what neighborhood do you guys live in?

H: Christian Hill.

C: That's a nice neighborhood; do you like it up there?

H: Yes, yes.

C: Is there much of an Iranian community or a Middle Eastern community in this city? Is there a mosque you go to?

H: I know some Iranians who go to mosque, but not in Lowell. Since I am not a religious, I don't go to mosque, but we have an Iranian community and mostly we get together for our traditional ceremonies, like next week that is our new year. And we have about 2,000 Iranians in Boston getting together.

C: What is the name of the ceremony...Norooz that's coming up?

H: Norooz, yes.

C: Is this a Muslim celebration or is this an older...

H: Yes, it's older.

C: So it is from the Zoroastrian period... Can you talk a little bit about this?

H: Our year starts at the first day of the spring and we celebrate for thirteen days.

C: Do you feel a part of the Christian Hill neighborhood here, or is it just a place where you live? Part of the point of this study is to figure out...the Park is interested in the role that neighborhoods still play in Lowell, and some people would say they're not very important, they might have been important historically, but for people today they're not very important, so I'm just trying to get your response to that. Do you shop in your neighborhood, or do you just go to Market Basket wherever?

H: I usually go to Market Basket in Tewksbury. There is also one closer to my house in Lowell, but I would rather not to shop there, because most of the things are not fresh. Also once in a while I try to go to Watertown to the Iranian store there. Every two years I go to Iran and I bring some of the things that I need. But still there are times that I have to go Iranian store here.

C: No, that makes sense. Do many other Iranians live in Lowell?

H: Not too many... but in Pelham, New Hampshire.... There are some Iranians... but mostly they live close to Boston. The statistic that I heard is that 85% of Iranians are educated.

C: I read that they are mostly people that came after the 1979 revolution, is that your experience too?

H: Yes, that's true.

C: Are there other people like you who have arrived more recently than that?

H: Yes, I know lots of people and mostly women. I think because most of the people in Iran are not happy with the government. That is why the Iranian Immigrant population increased in the last few years. And since it is hard to come to the U.S., they mostly move either to Europe or Canada.

C: When you go to your meetings do you wear any traditional Iranian clothing? It doesn't sound like that would be you...

H: No, actually we don't have that much in terms of traditional Iranian cloths. But some cities have traditional clothes. Actually, I'm from the capital of Iran, Tehran, and we don't have any special clothes, but we have some traditional dances.

C: Do you miss it sometimes, the food or certain aspects?

H: Oh, yes! I do, mostly the family and friends, and the tradition. Also our famous food, kabob, and even though we have some famous Iranian restaurants here it's so different from Iran.

C: Do they cater more to American tastes in restaurants here?

H: No...I don't know what that is about.... If the meat is different....It just tastes different. It's really good in Iran...or maybe it is not only the food, the places of some restaurants that we go to, there are places next to the river, in the mountains, and even if it's in the city... they make the kabob and tea, and I really miss those things.

C: Do you go to Iranian restaurants around here or do you mostly cook at home?

H: Yeah, we mostly cook at home because, as I said, the places are close to Boston, so it's not easy to go to Boston and come back, especially if it is during the week, but we go there once in a while.

C: Do you cook mostly Iranian food or has your cooking become Americanized since you've lived here?

H: Actually, because my husband has been living here for so long, and he has two sons, whose mother was American, they mostly eat American food. When I arrived here, I came to a house with mostly American traditions. Now that my step sons moved out, it has changed a little. But my son who is 16 now would rather to have American food. However, there are some Iranian foods that he loves, but mostly it's American. It takes few hours to make our food and because of the life style here, I rather have American food too, just to save my time. We eat steaks, sandwiches...mostly American food, but sometime we eat Iranian food.

C: I'm sure it's really good!...Do you find that your daily life in Lowell is very different from Iran?

H: Yes, it is very different. In Iran women don't work, so it's really different than here.... you have to go to work or school, you are always busy. In Iran, women mostly have fun. They spend most of their time shopping, fixing their hair, nails, and they get together to socialize. So, over here it's a completely different life.

C: Do you miss that older life?

H: Yes, I really miss that. It's more fun. Over here you have more responsibilities, and there is not that much time to get together and socialize. But, every time I go to Iran I feel it is changing there too. I believe the life style in Iran is changing; more women work now, so there would be less time for other things.

C: How do you stay in touch with family in Iran? Do you call on the phone?

H: Yes, mostly. The first few years after I moved here, my brother still was in Iran and we almost were chatting every night...

C: You mean on the internet?

H: Yes. After my brother moved to India, I used phone cards, which is cheaper.

C: Where does he live in India?

H: He's in Pune.

C: Have your family members been able to come to visit you in the U.S.?

H: No, my mom, applied twice and they didn't give her a visa.

C: Was that an issue with the U.S. government or the Iranian, or both?

H: It was mostly the U.S. After the revolution in Iran we don't have an U.S. embassy. So we usually go to Turkey or Dubai to apply for visas. So it is a long process. Now I'm applying for my brother to come to my graduation which is in May and I don't know if he is going to be able to get the visa, there's not much of chance... There have been times when I needed my mom to be here...but she wasn't able to get visa.

C: So, you usually deal with the INS office in Boston then?

H: Yes. But there is nothing really you can do.

C: I've been there a couple of times too and it's not fun.

H: No, not at all.

C: Do you feel like you've changed since you've come to the United States? Has your personality changed?

H: Yes, a lot. I can say both in good and bad ways. I feel calmer and have more confidence. When I was in Iran, my mom was always worried that some day I will be in trouble, because I always tried to rebel against the government. If a woman goes out and her hair is not perfectly covered she can end up in jail. This makes people feel nervous and not safe. Also the life style here... there are more responsibilities and less socializing, that has made me more mature. On the other hand, I use to be much more contented and enjoy my life when I was with my family and friends in Iran. Since I came here even though I had a lot of success, I still feel that there is something missing in my life.

C: Do you speak English with your son, or do you speak Farsi?

H: I speak Farsi all the time unless he doesn't understand what I'm saying.

C: Why do you do that?

H: I really want him to remember Farsi. I would say that 90% of Iranians send their children to Farsi class. They have Farsi class in Boston, But my son, he doesn't want to go. He's has been trying to improve his English, so I don't want to put him under more pressure...He can't read and write Farsi, but he can talk. So this is the least I can do for him, speak Farsi at home.

C: How is he doing in school? Do you feel like he's facing problems because of his bilingual background and so on, or do you find that the school is accommodating?

H: No he doesn't have any problems with language, but until a few months ago, he was hiding that he was Iranian and this became a big problem for him at school. I want him to learn to be proud of being Iranian. Even though everyone likes him at the school, teachers and students, but still there were some kids that bothered him. Now that he is more mature and he knows more about Iran, he doesn't have any problem and in fact he is proud.

C: So, there is pressure because of his Iranian background there.

H: Right now he's going to the high school, before he didn't have that problem.

C: So, what was he saying he was?

H: He would just make up stuff like, "I'm half Greek." I told him I was going to go to school and talk to principle, but of course he didn't want me to. So I started talking to him, showed him some Iranian movies and music and made him more comfortable with our culture. Since he likes to be a DJ, I'm trying to help him become a DJ for Iranian parties. He also is more involved with Iran this way. Since then I can say he improved a lot. He is much happier at school.

C: What are the parties for?

H: Mostly the big parties are for our New Year, but I can say at least once a month some of us get together and we are all having parties, and we even celebrate American New Years.

C: So for New Years you just call it a party?

H: Yes.

C: But is that sort of an Iranian party, or what's the origin of that?

H: There are some celebrations starting a week before New Year. There is a night we have fire works, beside dancing, and serving some foods. During the first night of our New Year, the Iranian community manages a big party in Boston, with a singer coming from California...So, next Saturday in a hotel in Boston, we are celebrating.

C: Okay, so you have music there and food?

H: yes, we have food, tea and different kind of Iranian sweets.

C: So, your husband's working, you're in school, and you're training to become a nurse, right?

H: No, I'm a biology major and I'm planning to go to dental school. And my husband, he is an engineer.

C: And your husband worked in Ohio for a while...was it Columbus?

H: Yes, but now he is coming back.

C: Have you had any jobs in the U.S. or mostly school?

H: First when I came here, I worked at Middlesex for a while...I worked as a secretary to just help my language, and it was for one and a half years. I worked part-time. I worked at a dentist office for a month and a half just to help my resume for dental school.

C: So are you hoping to work in a dental office?

H: Since, I'm a bio major, I am hoping to get a job in the hospital, labs, or research.

C: This is a good area for that kind of work. So, obviously you're very connected within the Iranian community. Is there any other organization that you're part of, or any other things you do for social networking?

H: Not really, I'm really busy with school and my life. If I have any free time, I try to spend it with my son and make up for the times that I am at school.

C: Yeah, going to school is a lot of responsibility. How many times have you been able to go back to Iran since you've been here?

H: The first few years, I was going every summer. But the last four years, I went every other year.

C: Is that the rhythm that you're trying to maintain now?

H: It seems that every year it is becoming harder to go back to Iran. And my son, I guess he becomes more Americanized, and also all his friends are here, so he doesn't want to stay there for a long time. He just wants to visit the family and come back and I would rather to stay the whole summer. There is also the problem with mandatory military service for men of age 18, and since my son is 16, there is a possibility that they wouldn't let him come back to the United States. So he would rather not to go.

C: He's smart to be careful. What do you do for fun? Are there any radio stations or other ways you keep up with Iranian news?

H: I do have Iranian TV that I get via satellite. And I am happy that my son can watch Iranian movies. It helps his language and I believe it makes him more interested in the culture.

C: And is he responding to it?

H: Yes.

C: So he's not as resistant any more...Is it your hope that he passes this on to his kids should he choose to have kids?

H: There isn't that much...It depends on who he's going to marry. If he's gonna marry an Iranian girl than I'm sure it's going to be that way. But if he's not...I think it's mostly the mother that passes things to the child. I can see the difference between my son and my husband's sons. Even though my husband is Iranian...but since their mother is American, they don't even speak Farsi, and they don't know anything about the Iranian traditions.

C: Is it becoming a part of his identity too, does he embrace that?

H: Yes, and as he becomes older he becomes more interested in his own culture.

C: Are you at all following the politics in the town of Lowell? Local politics?

H: No.

C: Part of what we're trying to figure out is, and I think there's a lot to the claim, that recent immigrants are always pushed out of politics even if their citizens, that there's certain more established groups hanging on to the power, and there's even several allegations in several MA cities of voter fraud, that new immigrants are deliberately kept out of the political process. Have you experienced any of that?

H: No actually my husband, he cares about politics, and he votes.

C: Today is the 14th; I guess there are elections in Iran today too.

H: Yes, it's today. Most of the people they don't care, because they cheat and already know who's going to win.

C: Have you personally experienced discrimination in the United States because you're Iranian?

H: No.

C: Do you sometimes feel as a person from the Middle East that...

H: Only when I'm in the airport! That's the only place that I feel concerned that I'm Iranian.

C: So you get extra security checks?

H: Yes, always.

C: Are you happy with the education that your son is getting...he's at Lowell High School now?

H: No. He is at Lowell Voc. But I'm not happy. The level of education here is much lower compared to Iran. However I know when he goes to college he is going to have a great education.

C: Do you think that's going to hurt him in the future?

H: Yes, you can see that 99% of the foreigners that got their high school diploma outside of the U.S., they don't have any problem with technical courses like math, physics, or chemistry. I wish that my son could have that level of education in his high school.

C: Would you like to see that changing?

H: Yes, but this change has to start from the first year of school. I think when they are younger, they are more open to absorbing information and they actually, how do I say...they are wasting those years.

C: Do you go to the parent/teacher conferences, the PTA meetings, or anything?

H: Not really. I went a few times. They don't do anything important, there just a routine thing that they do. Their expectation of kids is very low.

C: So you've gone to these things and don't feel there's much sense. But you meet with the teachers about your son specifically?

H: Yes.

C: So you are active in his education then. Do you feel that your cultural identity is valued, that the school respects those?

H: No, not really. Here they don't even know much about Iran. Sometimes people ask me, "Where are you from?" and I say "Iran" and they are like what? Iraq? They haven't even heard about it. People don't know that much about Iran. But in California, in Los Angeles, they have a one day vacation for New Year. It's our tradition that for our New Year we have to set a table and the whole family sits in front of our table at the time the year changes, but we never had the chance to do that because my son and me, we are always at school at that time and my husband is at work.

C: The last segment of this study, we've been asked by the Lowell National Historic Park to do this, part of the purpose of this study is for the Park to find better ways to reach out to newer immigrants. Have you been down to the Park or any of the museums that they have?

H: No.

C: You've done the canal tours?

H: No.

C: Do you feel that it's advertised in town a lot?

H: No.

C: Would you want to go there at some point?

H: Yes, sometimes when I am free, I would like to go there.

C: Do you go to any of the city festivals like the folk festival?

H: I used to go a lot, but the last few years because I have been really busy I haven't. But my son goes.

C: Did you also like the Southeast Asian Water festival that the Cambodians put on?

H: Yes, I really liked that.

C: Is there a question that you would have liked me to ask you? Anything you think I missed?

H: Actually I think it is a good idea to have some advertisement about Iran or some other countries that are not well known in this city.

C: Thanks very much for your time.

H: You're welcome, I hope it helped you.